

TOPIC:

Pet Safety with Children in a Foster Home

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INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOSTER PARENT TRAINING CREDIT:

**Read through this self-study*

**Fill out the "CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING" Questionnaire*

**Return to ACRF for 1.0 hour of training credit.*

The presence of animals in foster homes can be a benefit and have a positive and therapeutic effect on the children. For a foster child, pets can be a fundament of their emotional health, sharers of unconditional friendship, and a constant presence in a world that has lacked stability and security for them. Some pets, however, can also pose a risk to children. It is your job as a foster parent, to ensure that the child's welfare is always protected. While pets can be beneficial, pets can also become the target of a foster child's frustration and suppressed anger. Knowing whether a pet, like a dog or cat, will be helpful or hurtful to a foster child depends on a thorough knowledge of the history of both, the child and pet.



For someone with a difficult past, a pet can be an incredible source of comfort. They also teach responsibility. Getting up to walk the dog on a cold winter morning is no small task, but it helps build character and trust in a foster child. On the other hand, cats demand almost nothing from the people they live with which can come as a pleasant surprise for a foster child who had to care for his younger siblings when their parents were unable to. For a foster child who realizes that their birth parents may not be able to provide for them or be interested in their well-being, living with a family pet who accepts them unconditionally can be priceless.

Pets in the household will be considered at the time of the Health and Safety inspection during the assessment process. It should be noted however, that there is an ongoing duty to ensure the child's safety. Household circumstances can quickly change. For example, you might find yourself looking after another person's pets or dealing with your own pet being becoming sick. It is always best practice to ask the child's caseworker if the child has any allergies or fear of certain pets. This will help determine if your family is a safe and comfortable placement for that child. It is important to follow safety guidelines to ensure children are always kept safe around family pets. Pets can become very jealous when there's a new person in the family, especially if they've been used to having all the attention! It is important to allow your animal and foster child to be introduced to one another with close supervision and in a safe and secure environment. Please ensure you teach your foster child how to treat your animals to prevent any future problems which may arise due to a child handling your pet incorrectly.

Reporting Aggressive Behavior to OCS

It is the resource family's duty to inform OCS if your pet has a history of aggressive behavior or biting whether that pet has been a subject to contact with an animal control officer or not. You should notify OCS within 24 hours of any occurrence of aggressive behavior or biting by an animal in your home and proceed to immediately remove the pet from any contact of adults or children. OCS may determine that the animal is a threat to the life or safety of adults or children in care and may have the pet permanently removed from the home.

Taking care of a pet can help children develop social skills. However, certain guidelines pertain:

1. Since very young children (Under age 4 years) do not have the maturity to control their aggressive and angry impulses yet, they should be always monitored and supervised with pets.
2. Young children (under 10 years) are unable to care for a large animal, a cat, or a dog, completely on their own.
3. Foster parents must oversee the pet’s care even if they believe their child is old enough to care for a pet.
4. Children should be reminded in a gentle, not scolding way, that animals like people, need food, water, and exercise.
5. Foster parents serve as role models. Children learn responsible behavior around animals by observing your behavior.



Advantages of having a pet in your foster home:

Children raised with pets show many benefits. Developing positive feelings about pets can contribute to a child’s self-esteem and self-confidence. Positive relationships with pets can aid in the development of trusting relationships with others. A good relationship with a pet can also help in developing non-verbal communication, compassion, and empathy. Pets can serve different purposes for children in foster care:

- They can be safe recipients of secrets and private thoughts—children often talk to their pets, just like they do to their stuffed animals.
- They can help develop responsible behavior in the foster children who care for them.
- They can help with separation anxiety and attachment issues.
- They can teach respect for other living things.
- They can help with comfort contact and show love, loyalty, and affection.

Although most foster children are gentle and appropriate with pets, some may be overly rough or even abusive. If such behavior persists, it may be a sign of significant emotional problems from their past traumas. If a foster child abuses, tortures, or kills pets, this should be brought to the attention of the caseworker immediately so they can make a referral to a professional for a comprehensive evaluation. If you are noticing some of these behaviors, refer to our self-study titled “Animal Cruelty and Children” for further guidance.

<p><u>Pet Allergy Signs and Symptoms</u> <u>in Children:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sneezing• Runny nose• Itchy, red, or watery eyes• Cough• Difficulty breathing• Itchy nose or throat• Frequent rubbing of nose• Eczema or itchy skin

Things to Remember:

- In all cases, pets are expected to be well cared for and fully up to date with their vaccinations and medical appointments. Their food and water must be fresh and not contaminate human food preparation areas. All feces and litter boxes must be cleaned regularly and not present any risk to humans. Households should not have any unpleasant odors resulting from owning pets. Any animal hair, feathers or other mess coming from animals should be regularly cleaned, swept, or vacuumed.
- Some animals are likely to enter children’s rooms and sleep on their beds. This can present an additional risk of suffocation to small children, particularly by cats and small dogs. Strategies must be in place to prevent this. If an animal poses any risk, come up with a strategy to either reduce or remove the risk. For example, a small pet may not be allowed in the child’s room.
- A foster home serving two or fewer residents, may have amphibians, ferrets, or reptiles, if approved by OCS. Fish tanks or other reptile tanks containing pets should be placed where children cannot gain access. The area and floor outside of the aquarium or cage must be easily cleanable and cleaned and sanitized frequently. If you have chickens, rabbits, small rodents, reptiles, etc. as pets, they should be secured appropriately, and vet checked.

Families with pets can find out if a child they are asked to foster has a history of violent behavior from the foster child’s caseworker. While it’s important to protect your family from harm, it’s also important to give your foster child the opportunity to feel warmth and unconditional friendship. Introducing your foster child to a pet that they can form a special bond with is a great way to give them that chance!

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